http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue6/bronze-age-rings/
A note on Bronze Age rings and sealstones: their contribution to understanding Aegean cult practices

Linda Langley

University of Birmingham

Representations of cult scenes occur chiefly on engraved rings and sealstones; as a result they are a rich source for our knowledge of Minoan and Mycenaean religion and religious practices.¹ This note shall briefly discuss the imagery of a selection of rings and sealstones and their connections with the archaeological evidence of cult practice in the Bronze Age Aegean. I shall consider libations, sacrifice, offerings and hallucinogenic materials as part of the cult practice.

It is difficult for archaeologists to know what the people of the Aegean believed when it comes to religion and the taking part in cult and ritual activity. When looking at how cult practice may have taken place in the Aegean Bronze Age the imagery of the period is our best source of evidence as we have little indication from literary sources. Without literary evidence it can also be difficult to actually identify a site where ritual activity may have taken place. I shall now discuss a selection of the rings and sealstones that aid this area of study.

A bead seal from Thisbe (figure 1) shows a libation being poured into a large amphora and there are two people who appear to be worshipping or possibly blessing the libation.² A large amphora was found in the temple complex at Mycenae, it is of a similar shape and may have been used for libations.³ Due to its size, it was probably used for several people; also found in the temple were several cups and kylixes with ladles.⁴ This could suggest a libation being shared

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¹Nilsson 1927: 295. It should be noted that fresco fragments are also useful within this context.
²Evans 1925: plate II.
³Taylour and Moore 1999: 32.
⁴Taylour and Moore 1999: 32.
in a cult ritual. A gold ring from Tiryns (figure 2) shows four creatures carrying jugs towards a seated figure holding a conical rhyton; the seated figure appears to be waiting to receive the contents of the jugs.\(^5\) Rhyta have been found at many sites and are thought to be ritual indicators, as some have been found in cultic contexts. Some conical rhyta have also been found with other items of pottery, perhaps suggesting a domestic use. One example of this is an exquisite Minoan imported conical rhyta found at Thera; it was found with several items of pottery, such as cooking pots, but also with many fine imported pieces.\(^6\) Marinatos suggests that the fine ware, which includes the conical rhyton, was more precious and ‘must have stood on shelves’.\(^7\) So even though the conical rhyton was found with domestic vessels, it appears to have been separated from them, perhaps suggesting a certain amount of importance or the idea of saving it for a special occasion; a cult practice perhaps? In the throne room at Pylos a circular basin-like hollow with a curving channel leading to another channel was found beside the throne.\(^8\) It has been suggested that this hollow was made to provide a place for the king to pour out libations on ceremonial occasions.\(^9\) This hypothesized situation, which arises from the archaeological evidence, is strikingly similar to the image represented on the Tiryns ring (mentioned above). As rhyta have a hollow at their base to allow liquid to escape, it seems likely the seated figure on Tiryns ring intended to pour out the libation, possibly into a hollow or a receptacle. Tsountas House at Mycenae also contains an altar with a round depression that may have served as a receptacle for libations.\(^10\)

\(^5\) Papdemitriou 2001: 70.
\(^6\) Marinatos 1972: 30-32.
\(^7\) Marinatos 1972: 26.
\(^8\) Blegen and Rawson 1966: 88.
\(^10\) Hägg 1990: 178.
Sacrifice was a very important ritual in the Aegean Bronze Age and both archaeological and pictorial evidence show its use within a ritual setting.\textsuperscript{11} A sealing from Mallia (figure 3) shows a bull on an altar with a male officiate; it appears to be a sacrificial bull as a sword is hovering above it.\textsuperscript{12} The images tend to show animals being sacrificed on altars and we have evidence that stone altars did exist in the Bronze Age; the central court at Phaistos has one and Juktas has a stepped altar.\textsuperscript{13} Marinatos states there is little doubt that sacrificed animals were eaten, and our archaeological evidence for sacrifice comes mostly from animal bones and utensils which supports the idea of consumption.\textsuperscript{14} The cult building at Anemospilia contained evidence of cooking and feasting with conical cups, bowls, cooking pots and animal bones.\textsuperscript{15} The peak sanctuary of Juktas also contains evidence of ritual consumption from animal bones and conical cups.\textsuperscript{16}

Offerings as part of cult ritual are not uncommon in the Aegean and the temple at Mycenae contained several beads of amber, rock crystal, carnelian and glass, as well as small figures and conical rhyta, suggesting that these offerings were a part of a ritual setting.\textsuperscript{17} A gold ring from Thisbe (figure 4) shows offerings being handed to two seated figures; one seated figure is holding what appear to be poppy heads.\textsuperscript{18} A smaller figure is offering a bead necklace and more poppies to the seated figure.

Poppies may have been a part of cult practice in another form, as a hallucinogenic material. The method of incising an unripe poppy head to produce

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{11} Marinatos 1986: 14
\bibitem{12} Marinatos 1986: fig. 11.
\bibitem{13} Marinatos 1986: 15.
\bibitem{14} Marinatos 1986: 37.
\bibitem{15} Marinatos 1986: 38.
\bibitem{16} Marinatos 1986: 39.
\bibitem{17} Taylour and Moore 1999: 32.
\bibitem{18} Evans 1925: plate II
\end{thebibliography}
opium was known to the Minoans as early as 1400 BC, and Merrilees suggests it may have been used to induce a state of ecstasy that may have been essential to perform cult rituals.\(^{19}\) A scene from a ring discovered in Isopata (figure 5) possibly shows us how the taking of opium could be used in an ecstatic ritual, with the result being the manifestation a deity. The ring shows a group of women apparently dancing in the countryside with their arms raised and stretched forward.\(^{20}\) There is a small figure in the top left that appears to be floating – could this be a divinity? The fact that the poppy heads are offered to the seated figure (possibly a goddess) on the ring from Thisbe seems to suggest that they were part of cult practice.

A gold ring from Mycenae (figure 6) shows poppies being held by a seated woman with more being offered to her by a smaller figure, which could possibly be identified as a child.\(^{21}\) There is no reason to suspect that children were not involved in cult practice and this could be a depiction of a child’s role within the practices. This ring may show how poppies and the possible use of opium were part of cult practice. There is also a depiction of a floating figure on this ring, suggesting the potential presence of an evoked divinity.

There is sufficient archaeological evidence from vessels and libation receptacles to suggest that libations were a part of cult practice and these images do appear to tie in with the archaeological finds. Sacrifice was most certainly taking place as evidence from the animal bone and cooking utensils implies.\(^{22}\) The evidence of offerings from the temple complex at Mycenae suggests that offering items, such as beads, was connected with cult practice. The use of hallucinogenic materials is not confirmed, but the Minoans did know how to make opium so it seems likely

\(^{19}\) Merrilees 1962: 289.
\(^{20}\) Marinatos and Hirmer 1959: 111.
\(^{21}\) Marinatos and Hirmer 1959: 207.
\(^{22}\) Marinatos 1986: 37.
they would have used it. Also, the poppy does appear on the ring as an offering so it may be connected with ritual and divinities.

Although this discussion has been very brief, I hope that the significance of these images has been conveyed and the connections between the images and archaeological data are recognised. The pictorial evidence, entwined with the archaeological evidence, gives us an insight into how rituals may have been conducted. They also might give us a transitory insight into what the Minoans and Mycnenaeans may have thought their divinities looked like. It would seem, in the author’s opinion, that Bronze Age rings and sealstones are an invaluable contribution to the understanding of Aegean cult practices.

List of Images

Figure 1: Bead seal from Thisbe, drawn by E. Thackeray after Evans 1925: plate II.23

Figure 2: Gold ring from Tiryns, drawn by E. Thackeray after Papademetriou 2001: 70.

Figure 3: Mallia sealing, drawn by E. Thackeray after Marinatos 1986: 23, fig. 11.

Figure 4: Gold ring from Tisbe, drawn by E. Thackeray after Evans 1925: plate II.

Figure 5: Isopata ring, drawn by E. Thackeray after Marinatos and Hirmer 1959:111.

Figure 6: Gold ring from Mycenae, drawn by E. Thackeray after Marinatos and Hirmer 1959: 207.

23 I would like to acknowledge and thank Emma Thackeray for the drawings that so beautifully aid this note.
Figures

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.
Bibliography


